

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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WATERFOWL BREEDING GROUNDS HIT BY DROUGHT

Markedly poorer breeding ground conditions and lower duck populations than last year in key waterfowl breeding areas of western Canada and adjacent portions of the United States were noted in the May 1977 waterfowl breeding ground surveys conducted by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Canadian Wildlife Service, and State agencies.

While it is still too early to draw firm conclusions, it appears now that the outlook for ducks in some of the important breeding grounds of western Canada and the United States is much less favorable in 1977 than last year.

Additional information from the breeding ground surveys will be released as soon as available.

The changes are due to a major drought that has afflicted much of western Canada and the United States since late last summer. Precipitation over large portions of this area from September 1976 to April 1977 was approximately 50 percent below normal, according to meteorological reports. Conditions were reported to be the driest ever recorded at some locations within the drought area.

This situation was substantially changed in mid-May by heavy rains that provided at least temporary relief from the drought and significantly improved conditions for agriculture. However, they may have been too late to be of major benefit to waterfowl.

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The waterfowl surveys conducted so far show that the number of wetland basins containing water in the prairies and parklands of southern Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta are generally 40 to 50 percent below last year and, depending on the area, breeding duck populations are down 25 to 50 percent. Conditions are similar in important waterfowl breeding grounds in Montana and North Dakota. In South Dakota a slight increase in water areas is reported, but duck populations are below those of last year. Early reports from Minnesota indicate that the duck population is somewhat higher than last year in spite of a decrease in water areas.

In contrast to this picture, duck populations in some areas to the north of the prairies and parklands, where water conditions are more stable, show significant increases over last year. This indicates that large numbers of ducks moved in early May from dry areas to areas where water is more abundant. Surveys in these northern areas are still under-way and will not be completed until mid-June. The overall size of the 1977 spring duck populations will not be known until then.

Except for some areas in southern Saskatchewan, no increases in the number of wetlands or the number of ducks were evident after the May rains. However, water levels appear generally improved in wetland basins that had water previously, and many ducks that were previously in flocks were observed to be more widely dispersed in pairs. This suggests that the rains may stimulate some nesting efforts that otherwise would not have occurred. The success of these efforts will likely depend on additional rains later in the summer.

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